

# Understanding the Millennial Mindset

2d MLG “gets to the left of” behavioral health issues

by LT Michael Anderson, CHC, USN

**P**FC with phone in-hand: “Chaps, I need to talk. Is this a good time?”

Chaplain born in the 1960s: “You got a safe space here, brother. Any time is a good time. What’s happening?”

PFC with phone in-hand: “I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, and I cry at night.”

Chaplain born in the 1960s: “Take me through your feelings as this all started. Was there a seminal moment, or did it develop over time?”

PFC with phone in-hand: “It started two days ago, when this guy on Facebook totally flamed me for a selfie I posted, then his friends all blew up my phone after that. I got a ton of nasty IMs, and only five of my friends liked that selfie. It sucks chaps. I have no idea what to do. It feels hopeless.”

Chaplain born in the 1960s: “Uh, have you thought of unfriending these guys and not checking Messenger for a while? Maybe you could take a weekend away from your phone, do some PT, get some time outdoors, and sign up for that single Marine program paint ball trip?”

PFC with phone in-hand: [Blank stare, Pause] “Huh?”

Chaplain born in the 1960s: “Yeah, we can talk through your feelings now, then you could take a weekend away from your phone and maybe things will open up for you. It’s good to take a deep breath and center yourself every once in a while. It helps put things in perspective and have a healthier, future-focused outlook. We can follow up on Monday to see how you’re progressing.”

PFC with phone in-hand: “No way. I’ll post something about how I’m feeling and my friends will get me through this. Thanks for listening, chaps.”

**>LT Anderson is the Chaplain, 8th Engineer Support Battalion, 2d Marine Logistics Group. His previous duty stations include USS (CG Antietam 54) and U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan, where he developed total-being wellness and resiliency-building programs to address behavioral health issues.**



**Are Millennial decision-making skills more reactionary than solution based?** (Photo by LCpl Angelica Annastas.)

Chaplain born in the 1960s: [Sigh.]

In an ever rapidly evolving and increasingly technology-centric world, the generation gap is at its widest with no narrowing in sight. Often times we exasperated baby boomer/GenX/GenY Marine leaders, caregivers, and concerned family members embark on a seemingly endless quest for the holy grail of modern day behavioral health: some method—some procedure—some magic words—that will enable us to “get between the ears” of this millennial gen-

eration of Marines so we can help them grow into outstanding, mission-capable leaders. We see them constantly scrolling through their phones with dead-eyed looks on their faces, occasionally cracking a half-smile, when they should be doing something we deem productive, meaningful, and impactful. After all, we faced the same challenges as we emerged from adolescence, correct? Relationships, social pressure, financial issues, work operational tempo, family of origin issues, and other stressors weren’t

invented by Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. We didn't need apps to process, overcome, and cope with stress, did we? We actually looked people in the eye and talked to them for cryin' out loud! What gives?

Intergenerational empathy is more difficult to attain than ever. We just don't see why Millennials, like the "PFC with phone in-hand" can't address behavioral health problems like we did back in the day. It's a real problem, even with the absolute best young people our society has to offer, the brave few who volunteered to be United States Marines. In an effort to bridge this chasm and "get to the left of" a growing number behavioral health issues, the CO, 8th Engineer Support Battalion (8th ESB) LtCol Lauren Edwards, commissioned the 8th ESB behavioral health team—military family life counselors (MFLCs), the battalion chaplain, and medical officer to work with the battalion's most populous and mission-diverse company, the Engineer Support Company (ESC), to forge a behavioral health partnership, conduct focus groups, analyze findings, create a report identifying sources of millennial behavioral health problems, and galvanize line leadership and the behavioral health team, moving toward a common goal, to get to the left of things that negatively affect junior Marines' health, wellness, and mission readiness. Given the 2d MLG Commanding General's "Protect What You've Earned" positive thoughtful decision-making vision, and the 8th ESB Commander's philosophy of total-being wellness—as a key component of mission readiness, with intent/deliverables—clearly stated and understood, the 8th ESB behavioral health/ESC team went into action in Spring 2016.

MFLC Teresa Carter conducted three ESC "Building Resiliency Groups" consisting of 20 Marines, each with a clearer understanding of the behavioral health issues facing millennial Marines as the desired outcome. Through a combination of controlled questions and open discussion, the diverse groups of millennial Marines engaged Ms. Carter's resiliency material, offered insights into the struggles they face, and identified ways older generations

fail in addressing their unmet needs. Throughout these fact-finding evolutions, a trending consensus on several millennial resilience-deteriorating and generation gap enlarging issues came to light:

- They acknowledge that they have more of a sense of entitlement and enablement.
- They tend to not utilize healthy coping skills or resources as emphasis is always on the individual.
- They feel that their generation has been exposed to sensationalizing of attention-seeking or self-harm behaviors much more than older generations.

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***They attribute their lack of interpersonal and communications skills to technology and social media.***

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- They demonstrate a type of "here-and-now" thinking with little future-forward thinking that could influence living "in the moment." Decision making is more reactive than solution-based.
- They attribute their lack of interpersonal and communications skills to technology and social media.
- They cite the previous generations' trending family dynamics—single parent homes, absentee fathers/father figures, and latch-key parenting—as contributing factors to adjustment and adaptation issues within a statistically predominantly male environment with multiple authority figures like the USMC.
- They feel that they have ideas to better unit operations that are not acknowledged. They are used to always having a voice on social media.

Millennials also identified strengths that enable them to overcome these largely technology-driven maladies:

- They feel that they are more knowledgeable and skilled with ever-evolving technology.

- They believe they have a more well-rounded education when entering the Marine Corps.
- They feel that there are more and a greater variety of resources and information readily and immediately available to them through technology.

ESC Company Commander, Capt Stephen Strieby, Company First Sergeant, 1st Sgt Ernest Twigg, and MFLC Melissa McDowell incorporated these findings into a revamped, comprehensive and, thus-far, highly successful mentorship program. Given the Building Resiliency Group results listed above, ESC leadership, along with MFLC, chaplain, medical, and family readiness team members, concluded that the best way to instill a sense of meaning, purpose, and integrity into their Marines' decision-making process is to equip their peer mentors—the most motivated of the millennials who "get it" and have a built-in understanding of how to communicate resilience-building ideas and incorporate resilience-building behaviors into millennials' technology-driven lives—with the most/best tools possible. To that end, the ESC mentorship program objective was codified as follows:

The objective of Engineer Support Company's mentorship program is to be as proactive as possible and empower our mentors in order to produce a relationship between the mentee and mentor that equates to a force multiplier. This means enhancing our Marines through a never relenting process of continuing actions, constant education, guidance, and mentorship to the mentors.

Education enhances the resourcefulness of our mentors setting the conditions for decentralization and mission tactics. The mentors can depend on a network of various resources without relying on a single point of failure. This ultimately increases belief in the program vice the program falling to the boards as a check in the box. Education arrives from Senior Leaders, the Chaplain, and outside resources such as the Marine Family Life Counselor giving classes and guided discussions.



**From civilian to Marine.** (Photo by Sgt Tyler Viglione.)

Guidance keeps the mentors inside the lateral limits and umbrella of unity of command. It protects inexperienced leaders from making errors and also acts as a road map providing a moral

azimuth to direct them in assisting their mentee. Also, guidance keeps in the framework of commander's intent and creates a forcing function to open lines of communication. The



**Diagram 1: CJCSI 3405.1 (taken from Military Medicine: August 2010). The next step is beginning a big picture empathetic generational gap bridging movement that will enable older generations to effectively understand and communicate with Millennial Marines.**

Company Commander can shape the mentorship simply by being engaged. The last and most important point is the mentors receive in-depth mentorship themselves keeping to the belief of lead by example. The mentors first have sessions with the Company Commander and First Sergeant and execute some values based tactical decisions games. This is a program that the command/ staff team not only believes in but also are members of. An example of this idea is the First Sergeant checks in with the Company Commander, when the First Sergeant is off deck or out of the area a simple situation report is texted to the Company Commander. Engineer Support Company Mentorship's bottom line is leadership by example at all levels.

Though the data set is small and results are mostly anecdotal at this point, this program implementation has proliferated positive coping skills, positive thinking, realistic problem solving (as opposed to virtual/cyber-based problem solving), and greatly increased behavioral control. Ms. McDowell has conducted six ESC resiliency workshops and five ESC mentorship training sessions since Ms. Carter's findings were presented to 2d MLG and 8th ESB leadership. While effectiveness end results will become clearer over the course of the ensuing year, 8th ESB and ESC now understand the prevailing millennial mindset and resulting behavioral health issues and, subsequently, have taken first steps to promote total being (social/physical/environmental/medical/spiritual/nutritional/psychological/behavioral) wellness and mission readiness, as outlined in *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3405.1, Chairman's Total Force Fitness Framework*, (Washington, DC: September 2013) (see Diagram 1), through organized, trained, and highly motivated peer mentorship and the utilization of chaplain, medical, and family life/family readiness resources.

*>Author's Note: Part II of this article, written by Chaplain Gregory Hazlett of 2d Maintenance Battalion, will outline the origins of this 2d MLG crucial leadership philosophy (see page WE4).*

